

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510 - 3505

June 20, 2018

The Honorable Alex Azar
Secretary
Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20201

The Honorable Kirstjen Nielsen
Secretary
Department of Homeland Security
301 7th Street, S.W.
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Secretary Azar and Secretary Nielsen:

I write to express my deep concern with recent press reports regarding the wellbeing of children under the care of Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR).

The Washington Post and *National Public Radio* have reported that the trauma experienced by children forcibly taken from their parents by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents is likely to have long-term effects on their mental, emotional and physical health. The *Post* article quotes a letter mental health professionals sent to Attorney General Sessions that says, "[t]o pretend that separated children do not grow up with the shrapnel of this traumatic experience embedded in their minds is to disregard everything we know about child development, the brain, and trauma."

Further, this reporting indicates that in at least one facility housing these children, staff are under the impression that ORR policy prohibits them from hugging or otherwise physically comforting children as young as two years old who are under extreme stress.

Therefore, I have the following questions:

- After a child is brought to an ORR facility, when will s/he receive a medical evaluation including mental and emotional health screening?
- ORR has a policy of providing mental health care for all unaccompanied children. How many mental health professionals do you have on staff to provide the "weekly individual and group counseling sessions?"
 - Have you had to increase staff since the "zero-tolerance" policy began?
 - If not, how are you able to keep up with increased demand?
- What is ORR's policy regarding comforting children under ORR care? Please provide any policies related to the comforting of children in writing.
 - Does that policy apply to the children interacting among themselves, the staff caring for the children, or both?
 - How does HHS disseminate policies and procedures to HHS operated facilities?
- Does HHS have a policy of informing the children of their parent(s) location or status?
- Does HHS and DHS rely on medical professionals' advice when participating in interagency policy discussions related to the apprehension, housing, and care of children? If so, please provide information relating to the medical professionals' recommendations

for whether it is in the best medical interest of the child to be separated from his/her parents.

- Please also provide any medical assessments regarding the effect of long-term detention on a child's development and mental wellbeing.

Several of my colleagues have written to you, Secretary Nielsen, regarding CBP's application of the "zero-tolerance" policy to asylum seekers and I echo their concerns. As Laura Bush wrote in *The Washington Post*, the policy is "immoral," and I ask that you cease this practice of separating children from their parents immediately. I implore you not just as a Senator, but as a father and grandfather – please take action to prevent any more children from suffering such trauma.

Thank you for your immediate attention to this matter and I look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Sherrod Brown". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sherrod Brown
United States Senator